

Preface and Acknowledgments

In the summer of 2003, I found myself taking a group of British music lovers on an educational tour of St. Petersburg. One of the main attractions on the schedule was Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's apartment on Zagorodny Avenue, where the composer's long fur-tipped coat was hanging up over a little table where Stravinsky's calling card lay, while in the study, two large writing desks allowed the composer and his wife, Nadezhda, to face each other as they wrote. I had always been impressed by the authenticity of the place, which looks as if Rimsky-Korsakov might step back in through the door at any moment. But one of the tourists was clearly disappointed. She was startled that there was nothing to be seen but a kind of professorial respectability. What had she expected? Her description of the kind of dwelling the composer *should* have occupied was a multi-colored palace, something along the lines of Leon Bakst's set for the ballet *Sheherazade*. Rimsky-Korsakov had only written a symphonic poem, but Sergei Diaghilev had used it as a ballet score in Paris after the composer's death, and he added an orgy and a massacre, provoking Nadezhda to protest. Perhaps the tourist also thought that Rimsky-Korsakov would stagger from orgy to massacre to orgy. This brought home to me the gulf between the Russian image of Rimsky-Korsakov—a respectable professor with a colorful imagination—as compared to the Western image, which has been shaped largely by a lurid balletic reinterpretation of *Sheherazade* that would have outraged its composer.

The genre on which Rimsky-Korsakov staked his reputation was opera, and he contributed fifteen works to the repertoire. About half of these are well established in the repertoire of Russian opera companies, but in the West, only *The Golden Cockerel* makes frequent appearances, some of the others are occasionally performed, and the rest are unknown. The success of the *Cockerel*, the strangest of Rimsky-Korsakov's operas, is also due to Diaghilev's bold adaptation: his 1914 *Cockerel* was again staged as a ballet, with the singers and their words put on the same level as the orchestral writing. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Western audiences did not yet know Russian opera, and Western companies were not prepared to take them on. The finances of Diaghilev's enterprise were usually precarious, and his artists were Russian, so translated versions were not an

option at this stage. He realized that he needed to shift Russian texts to the background, before an opera could win a hearing abroad. A century has passed since then, and given that his operas are still little known outside Russia, Western audiences have been unable to grasp his true stature. This, in turn, means that there is nothing that impels them to seek out his non-operatic works: there are dozens of wonderful songs, chamber music, and various orchestral pieces beyond *Sheherazade*.

Richard Taruskin encapsulated the problem of Rimsky-Korsakov in the West: his works “can be divided into two groups: the unknown and the overplayed. They are not of equal size. The overplayed category consists, by my count, of exactly five pieces.”¹ These five he lists as follows: “The Flight of the Bumble Bee” (an extract from the opera *The Tale of Tsar Saltan*), “The Song of India” (sung by the Hindu Trader in the opera *Sadko*), and then three “symphonic warhorses”: *Sheherazade*, the *Capriccio espagnol*, and the *Russian Easter Overture*. Taruskin demonstrates that this has skewed Rimsky-Korsakov’s reception in the West, where he is seen merely as a purveyor of entertaining trifles, not as a serious composer with a very substantial oeuvre. Western musicology had hitherto ignored Rimsky-Korsakov, but Taruskin’s pioneering article explains why they should change their attitude, not least because Stravinsky (who certainly does interest Western musicologists) cannot be accounted for without serious distortions unless his enormous debt to his teacher, Rimsky-Korsakov, is included, and not just for superficially similar early works like *The Firebird*, but for his principles of pitch organization, which stem from the older composer’s innovations and theoretical discoveries. But even if Taruskin managed to awaken some musicological interest in Rimsky-Korsakov, it will take much time and effort to shift the attitude of Western performers and their public.

In this context, the Bard Music Festival “Rimsky-Korsakov and His World,” held in the summer of 2018, is a unique and exciting event that will reveal much of the composer’s music that is still unknown to the West. This volume is published in association with the festival and is designed to acquaint readers with the most interesting and thought-provoking new research on Rimsky-Korsakov, including work from established and rising scholars, and from inside and outside Russia.

The volume begins with documentary materials, for the first time offering the Anglophone reader translations of the rich correspondence between Rimsky-Korsakov and the soprano Nadezhda Zabela-Vrubel, who was his muse between 1898 and 1904. Rimsky-Korsakov was a prolific correspondent, and most of his exchanges with musical colleagues have been published in Russian and thoroughly researched.

But this particular correspondence stands apart from the rest, because of the strong currents of emotion running just below the surface. It was selected for this volume for two purposes: it has much to tell us about how Rimsky-Korsakov dealt with the performers and theater management involved in productions of his operas, but it also gives us a unique insight into the composer's inner world which he kept hidden under the unruffled surface of his respectable professorial existence. Rimsky-Korsakov's biography contains nothing that could shock or fuel gossip: as a young naval officer, he traveled round the globe, but he settled down into a quiet family existence, far from the alcoholism that dogged several of his fellow composers. We might style him a workaholic today, but this is only a humorous pretense that such behavior is a vice or an addiction. The romanticized public image of artists is greatly enhanced by an early death or by great suffering, whether uninvited or self-inflicted, mental or physical. The public is less interested in a composer who is a family man with a successful career and a long and healthy existence. The correspondence between Rimsky-Korsakov and Zabela should do much to humanize Rimsky-Korsakov, softening his image. There is nothing scandalous, but there is much that is touching and even poignant.

A conscious effort has been made in this volume to bring Rimsky-Korsakov's operatic output into the foreground. The cultural context of his operas is inexhaustibly rich, and the resulting picture allows us to see the composer as a public intellectual as well as an artist, responding to a variety of political and aesthetic impulses of his time in a way that is more often associated with literary figures. For any scholar immersed in Rimsky-Korsakov's work, the interpretation of his operas is always an enjoyable and fruitful undertaking. Emily Frey's essay on *The Snow Maiden* is a reconsideration of this opera in the political context of the era, namely within a particular branch of 1870s populism that extolled "harmonious communal ritual, agrarian prehistory, [and] the development of individual feeling." By contrast, Anna Nisnevich uses Rimsky-Korsakov's opera *Mozart and Salieri*, a watershed work that inaugurated his "late" period, as a lens through which she observes and analyses Rimsky-Korsakov's creative crisis. As she explains, he attempted to renew his style by means of a more spontaneous and melodic approach that would clear away the "Salierism" he diagnosed in his music.

A trio of articles about Rimsky-Korsakov's last opera, *The Golden Cockerel*, demonstrates how rich this work is, since far from converging on a consensus, each essay illuminates a very different aspect. Adalyat Issiyeva sets the opera in the context of the composer's Orientalism, looking at its musical sources and more generally at the complexity of influences at work on an

artist working in the capital of a Russian Empire that directed much of its energy and ingenuity to the task of keeping its Asian territories under control. Simon Morrison's essay addresses two contrasting aspects of the opera: its political provocativeness, which leads to a censorship saga, but also the attraction of the music and the mystery of the story, which takes us outside of the political sphere. Using the aesthetic notion of *enchantment*, Morrison places the opera in the context of Symbolist and "decadent" currents in the culture of the time, and shows how these were still relevant in the 2012 production by the choreographer Alexei Ratmanský. My own addition to this forum on the *Cockereel* seeks to read the opera as a pointed political satire, prompted and shaped by the concrete events of the Russo-Japanese War. Here Rimsky-Korsakov appears as politically radical, and returns to the idioms (and clichés) of the Russian Style, not in a spirit of nostalgia, but with the aim of inverting and mocking his previous values, and also mocking the Russian state, whose hubris had led to a humiliating defeat.

The next group of articles addresses Rimsky-Korsakov in the context of his pedagogical activities and his school of composers. Olga Panteleeva sets the scene by writing about St. Petersburg Conservatory, arguing that under Rimsky-Korsakov, music theory was seen as the handmaiden to composition, which hindered the institutionalization of historical musicology. Yaroslav Timofeev focuses on a dramatic moment in the life of Stravinsky when he was forced to choose between loyalty to the memory of his beloved teacher Rimsky-Korsakov on the one hand, and his new loyalty, both commercial and artistic, to Diaghilev on the other hand—a choice, in effect, between St. Petersburg and Paris. Matters were brought to a head by the preparation of a new edition of *Khovanshchina* that was to be used for an "authentic" Paris production of the opera in 1913 in rivalry with the version prepared by Rimsky-Korsakov. Lidia Ader traces the fate of Rimsky-Korsakov's legacy in the Soviet Union of the 1920s and 1930s, when composition teaching (along with most aspects of life) became a bone of ideological contention. Her article allows us to understand how far-reaching Rimsky-Korsakov's principles of composition proved to be, forming a solid foundation that was built on by loyal members of his compositional school over the next two generations, through favorable and unfavorable ideological swings.

Leon Botstein's essay closes the volume with a broad consideration of Rimsky-Korsakov in the context of Russian politics, philosophy, and aesthetics in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, drawing some persuasive parallels between the development of Russian music and Russian painting. This book would never have come into existence without the Bard Music Festival, which is a unique enterprise that unites performers and scholars

each year in an exploration of a single composer. I have been privileged to attend and participate in several Bard festivals over the years, and I have always been thrilled by the scale of the events and the vision behind them. Many thanks are therefore due to the president of Bard College, Leon Botstein, who stands at the festival's helm. In the case of this book, I have been working most closely with Botstein's co-artistic director Christopher Gibbs, and the project benefited much from his guidance every step of the way. In the actual preparation of the book, I would like first to thank all of the contributors, most of whom conducted new research at my request and who showed much good will throughout the very thorough editing process. The volume itself was lovingly put together by Paul De Angelis, who made great efforts to see the big picture in each essay, while still training his eagle eye on minute details. I am immensely grateful to him for his professionalism and for his patience. Erin Clermont, the copy editor, kept all of us on our toes, and Irene Zedlacher, a person of many talents and many roles, lent her perceptive eye to the final polishing of the book. Karen Spencer skillfully set the words and images into the finished layout, and Don Giller set the music examples. Finally, I would like to thank Jonathan Walker, who, besides providing fine translations of the Russian sources and of the Russian-language contributions to the volume, was always on call for my queries on both content and style and who was able to cover my back on more than one occasion. Battling out the finer points of the Russo-Japanese War with him also left an indelible imprint on my own essay in this book.

NOTES

1. Richard Taruskin, "Catching Up with Rimsky-Korsakov," *Music Theory Spectrum* 33/2 (Fall 2011): 169–185, at 169.

